Wells Family Gathering
Elkton Oregon c 1872

Crossing into the Unknown Umpqua

From "A Simple Sketch of the Life of Mrs. Anna Elizabeth Mandler Wells"

Transcribed by Mary T. Wells

Entry 3 of 4

The Skinners welcomed the emigrants with open doors and arms and rendered them much aid in locating claims and pointing out directions. Mr. Skinner's family being the only white persons living in Eugene at the time, save one bachelor man. Mr. Wells left his wife with them while he went out looking for a claim. He located a 640 acre tract where Cottage Grove now is, and they moved on the claim; on April 9th, 1848 their second daughter was born, the first white child born in Lane County, and the first white child ever seen by those Indians and they wanted her. They would take her from her cradle or from the Mother's arms, and fondle, nod their heads, laugh, and pass her from one to the other, while the mother stood terrorized with fear, but there was nothing she could say or do. Sometimes they came in their war paints. They always wanted bread and more bread and milk and bacon or any thing they could see to eat. Mrs. Wells more through fear for her child gave them of all she had. March 25th, 1849 was born their first baby boy, and then came more demonstrations among the Indians and finally they began to take on an hostile attitude. And then came the wild cry of gold in California. The news spread rapidly and soon the great rush of 1849 was on. Mr. Wells and his brother, Dr. Daniel Wells, were the only men left to guard the women against the Indians, and they parading around in their war paint. They decided to abandon their claims there and look elsewhere. The situation being so alarming, more emigrants had come and were still coming, more settlements were springing up, every man's house was his castle, built of logs with a wooden latch on the door that responded to the pull of a string and that string always hung on the outside to every other white person, and no house was ever so full but what there was always room for more, none were ever turned away, always glad for a friendly white face. Such was the home of Levi Scott of Scotts valley near Yoncalla, and there Mrs. Wells with her two small children found refuge for the fall and winter of 1850 and 51. Mr. Wells never idle, went out with his brother scouting

around looking for a new location. The Hudson Bay Company, was then at Fort Umpqua, near where Elkton town now stands. In looking over the territory and visiting the Fort, they both found a realization of their dream of a house site—one two miles below the Fort, and the other three miles above on the banks of the beautiful flowing Umpqua. The one chose the one above the Fort, and there staked out his 640 acre Donation Land Claim in the fall of 1851, built a cabin and began to make preparations for a home for his family. October 13th, 1850, there came another baby girl to their family circle born at the house of the Scotts in Scott's valley.Them when located was another problem; no roads, no trails, no way to get supplies; but again there was no wavering nor faltering. During the winter they blazed a trail as best they could from Yoncalla through Drain to the Umpqua.Then once again as the verdure of spring began to appear and all nature burst into new life, activities began to increase around the Scott home, gathering together their few possessions which was little enough, gave stout hearts and willing hands, good neighbors and friends. There were no towns at that time, just a vast untamed wilderness, no near source of supplies. In accordance with the prearrangements in the first days of April (if I make no mistake the 6th day) 1851 the pack horses and mules were gathered around and carefully loaded with this, that and the other. Chickens were placed in coops or sacks and in equal number placed across the mules back to maintain a proper balance. Pigs the same to maintain proper balance—cows and oxen were driven or followed on foot. Other necessities, personal effects and what not were packed in similar manner. And finally the mother with babe in her arms mounted a horse, the father with another child, a friend with the family carried the boy or in turn he would ride on the horse behind the mother. She holding him on with one hand and the babe with the other, allowing the horse to use his own intelligence without guidance except for the gentle voice and kindly words to which he responded and cautiously picked his way over the rough, dim and dangerous trail, fording streams and climbing mountains where no white woman had ever been before. One other woman (the brother's wife) was with this little company on the way to her new home too. Thus they blazed the trail for others to follow. The trail had been used some by the Umpqua tribe of Indians in passing from the south of the river to their hunting grounds near where Yoncalla now is. After 20 miles of this dangerous and rugged mountains riding the valley began to open up before them and she came to the end of the long trail and what seemed to be her the most beautiful spot she had

ever beheld. And it was to be her home forever while she lived. With her German Bible clasped in her arms she fell upon her knees giving thanks and praise to God and burst into tears. This was home, her children's home, this wonderful climate with an abundance of good water and wood and wild game. The hardships of the trail were forgotten for a time, and all were so busy, neighbor helping neighbor in getting settled.

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Transcribed by Mary T. Wells – Part 3 of 4

Reflections

Jeffrey Hunt
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The photo, c. 1872–1875, was one of two loose photographs found in the front of the family album that I've since identified as belonging to my great-great-grandmother, Esther Wells Smith, who is seated in the bottom right. Her older sister, Carolyn Wells, is seated to her left. Carolyn was the baby gently passed around by the Indians in the following account, and purportedly the first white child born in Lane County, April 1848.

I believe this photo may have been taken around the time of Susanna Wells's funeral. Susanna, one of the Wells sisters, died as a young mother in 1871 along with her unnamed infant child. If she is indeed missing from this image, her absence—together with the visible flowers—might suggest the occasion was a memorial or family gathering in her honor. The presence of flowers and the somber tone may help explain the photograph's timing and mood.

The young man in the center is likely Darius Wells, the family's firstborn son. Born in 1849, he would have been between 23 and 26 years old at the time. The man on the far left may be Joseph Roberts, born in 1837 and married to Hannah Wells, born in 1853. That would make Joseph about 35 in this photo and Hannah about 19. The man pictured doesn't appear to be 35, so this identification may not hold. If the man in the center is Darius, then one of the young women is likely Julia Haney, his wife. That leaves several other sisters who may also be present—particularly Flora Wells (b. 1855) and Louisa M. Wells (b. 1858). Further work remains to confirm each identity.

Though taken years after the events described in the memoir, this photo helps root the narrative in real lives—faces and relationships stretching back to Oregon's early settlement. The Wells family were the first homesteaders in the Elkton area—just outside Fort Umpqua, the southernmost extension of the British Empire.